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ABSTRACT

This paper examines studies that have investigated academic learning outcomes in service learning, identifies unanswered questions in assessing academic efforts, and offers guidelines to evaluate content gains in courses that integrate service learning. Research shows that peer tutoring increases achievement scores for both the tutors and the students being tutored. Consistent gains in factual knowledge have been found when measuring the kind of information students are most likely to encounter in their field experiences. Studies show that community service is a valuable experience for helping students understand course material and achieve personal and educational goals. Some research shows that students involved in service learning get better grades and are more likely to feel that they have performed up to their potential in the course. Unanswered questions about service learning focus on: (1) why the assessment of academic learning outcomes in service learning is different; (2) what the methodological issues are that must be considered; and (3) what aspects of service learning have been most revealing. (Contains 30 references.) (SM)

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Examining Academic Learning Outcomes In Service-Learning: Recent Advances, Unanswered Questions, And Guidelines

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Abstract

Several studies have suggested that service-learning facilitates social growth, character development, civic responsibility, psychological development, moral and ego development . Perhaps the most difficult arena has been in the area of intellectual, cognitive, and academic effects. This paper seeks to examine studies that have investigated academic learning outcomes in service learning, identifies a few unanswered questions in assessing academic effects, and presents guidelines to evaluate content gains in courses that integrate service-learning.

Introduction

Service-learning as a pedagogical tool has been defined as learning that combines public service with planned, related educational outcomes through corresponding academic work (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Olszewski & Bussler, 1993). Programs linking the classroom with the community have expanded in the recent years. The 1993 National and Community Service Trust Act emphasizes the value of service-learning for faculty, students and communities. More than 400 colleges and universities are members of Campus Compact, established to foster civic responsibility in students and to contribute to community welfare through public service (Harward and Albert, 1994). More than 650 colleges and universities participate in the Campus Outreach Opportunity League, which supports students' involvement in community through campus-based workshops, grant programs, and technical assistance (Commission on National and Community Service 1993:xvii). These programs emphasize that community service enhances learning. To be effective in this area, course content must connect directly to the students' volunteer experience (Parker-Gwin, 1996).

The term "service learning" grew out of the work of Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey at the Southern Regional Education Board (Giles and Eyler, 1994). Service learning is the integration of service experiences into the academic content of a course by the addition of a reflection component in which the service becomes another "text" for that course (Lena, 1995). The pedagogical notion of integrating service into the curriculum is solidly based on the work of numerous well-known educators including John Dewey, Ralp Tyler, Hilda Taba, John Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, and Ted Sizler (Kinsley, 1992). Service learning which may assume several forms, is a pedagogical method that connects the practice and academic content of service to the curriculum and as an educational method, provides students with "fertile ground on which to test theories acquired in the classroom and to concretize abstract thought" (Kupiec, 1993; p.7). Students may develop their research, critical thinking and interpretation skills not only in the traditional ways, but in the context of the larger social, ethical and environmental implications of knowledge. Service learning blurs the line between content and method in a most productive way for it transcends each

(Lena, 1995).

Several studies have suggested that service-learning facilitates social growth, character development, civic responsibility (Bringle and Kremer,1993; Calabrese and Schumer, 1986; Corbett, 1977; Luchs, 1981, Wade, 1995), psychological development (Batchelder and Root, 1994; Exum, 1978; Kelly, 1989; Martin, 1977; Saunders, 1976) moral and ego development (Alexander, 1977; Edward, 1974; Reck, 1978). Perhaps the most difficult arena has been in the area of intellectual, cognitive, and academic effects (Kraft, 1996). This paper seeks to examine studies that have investigated academic learning outcomes in service learning, identifies a few unanswered questions in assessing academic effects, and presents guidelines to evaluate content gains in courses that integrate service-learning.

Review of Academic Learning Outcomes in Service-Learning

Hedin (1987) in a comprehensive meta-analysis on peer tutoring by high school students involved in service found increases in reading and math achievement scores both on the part of the tutor and the tutee. Although the achievement score increases in reading and math were modest, the author defends the analysis on the basis that small increases are evident with most learning and growth in general.

Hamilton and Zeldin (1987) found that when the measuring instrument is a general test of knowledge there is usually no difference between students in service programs and those in conventional classrooms who do not participate. Consistent gains in factual knowledge have been found, however, when researchers have used tests designed to measure the kinds of information students are more likely to encounter in their field experiences (Hamilton, 1987).

McCluskey-Fawcett and Green (1992) conducted a study using community service to teach developmental psychology. About half of the students (293 of 567) chose to work 50 hours as volunteers; the rest chose to write three papers. Although no significant differences were found between the two groups on overall satisfaction with the course, evaluation of these options suggested that students found the community service to be a valuable experience for understanding course material and achieving personal and educational goals.

An experimental study by Markus, Howard, & King (1993) of students in a large political science course revealed that students in service-learning sections of the course were significantly more likely than those in the traditional discussion sections to report that they had performed up to their potential in the course, had learned to apply principles from the course to new situations, and had developed a greater awareness of societal problems. Classroom learning and course grades also improved significantly as a result of students' participation in course-relevant community service.

Levesque and Prosser (1996) describe a federally sponsored service learning program in which students were enrolled in an undergraduate class titled Student Literacy Corps course for 1-3 credit hours. In addition to attending class for 2 hours each week, they completed 20 contact hours of tutoring for each credit hour received. Students tutored in Adult Basic Education programs, Even Start, and elementary and secondary schools throughout the metropolitan area. The results indicated that concepts like learning styles, educational aspirations, and instructional needs of urban economically disadvantaged children, became clearer.

Unanswered Questions and Guidelines

1. Why is the assessment of academic learning outcomes in service-learning difficult?

A challenge for researchers is the dramatically different nature and duration of the programs that go under the rubric of service learning ranging from volunteer and community service projects to field studies and internship programs. The confounding use of the service-learning term may be one reason why research on the impacts of service-learning has been difficult to conduct (Furco, 1996). Service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the receipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring (Furco, 1996). Thus, service-learning programs must integrate service into course(s) and be tied to measurable objectives that assess as well as enhance both the learning and the service.

2. What are the methodological issues that must be considered?

Most studies report qualitative or anecdotal evidence which makes it difficult to determine whether

content knowledge gains are practically significant. Additional ways of assessing content gains would include portfolios, self-assessments, checklists or rating scales, and criterion-referenced measures. Furthermore, to reduce researcher bias and increase test validity, test instruments used to measure gains in factual knowledge should not be developed by the same individual responsible for the service learning program.

3. In terms of academic learning outcomes, what aspects of service-learning have been most revealing?

Positive intellectual outcomes have been found in studies that incorporate tutoring because it is the form of service learning that is most school-like, and the knowledge and skills examined are most like those the tutors have been using (Kraft, 1996). Thus we need to explore other forms of service learning that test for gains in factual knowledge.

Significance

Service learning, rather than limiting learning experiences to vicarious exposure to critical issues and problems, engages students with the phenomenon under study. "Thinking begins in what may fairly be called a forked-road situation; a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma" (Dewey, 1938). It is much harder to replicate a forked-road situation in the classroom, and theoretical dilemmas are not generally as motivating. By placing our students in circumstances where they are inspired to ask the question "why ?", we are building a student body that may find more meaning and pride in their course work.

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